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When the marines stormed ashore in SANTO DOMINGO

American prestige went along with them, and almost no one claims that it was enhanced. Was that trip necessary? Here is an eyewitness report that raises disturbing questions.

By TAD SZULC

This spring the United States became engaged in one of the most hectic, bizarre and controversial diplomatic and military operations in recent history, highlighted by the landing of 22,000 troops in the Dominican Republic to protect American lives and to prevent what the Johnson Administration feared might be "another Cuba" in the Caribbean.

By late June, after the United States had bounced back and forth several times between contradictory policies, a commission from the Organization of American States—heavily influenced by its American member, white-haired, professional diplomatic troubleshooter Ellsworth Bunker—finally came up with the compromise proposals designed to satisfy two sides in the civil war. But looking back at the massive bloodshed and wild confusion of that savage Dominican spring, one finds it hard not to wonder why the same ideas could not have been advanced at the outset of the crisis, or shortly thereafter.

The story of the Dominican intervention would have been merely a comedy of errors and inconsistencies, a mixture of Hamlet and the Marx Brothers, if it were not for the thousands of Dominican dead and wounded in the eight-week civil war and for the deep involvement of American prestige.

The direct cost to the United States was some 25 lost lives of marines and paratroopers, over 100 casualties and many hundreds of millions of dollars. It is impossible to estimate the cost to America in lost confidence among people throughout the world who regarded the episode—rightly or wrongly—as an imperialist military move by the United States. The Dominican crisis created sharp divisions within the Administration in Washington. How the Government handled that crisis—with apparent confusion at the local embassy, at the State Department and in the Central Intelligence Agency—deserves close scrutiny, for American embassies are everywhere much the same, and similar problems may erupt anywhere at any time. The Dominican experience is not the sort that it would be beneficial to undergo more than once.

A good part of the reason for this drawn-out torture of the ancient city of Santo Domingo and its 460,000 inhabitants, if not the whole reason, seems to lie in the nature of the initial reporting on the Dominican crisis to the Administration in Washington by the U.S. Embassy in the Dominican capital. This frequently overemotional, exaggerated and partisan reporting went far to influence decision-making at the State Department and the White House, thus becoming the prime cause of most of the subsequent events. Later, the embassy's recommendations played a part in undermining, in effect, the peace-making efforts of special White House envoys on the scene.

For this reason, much of what happened in the Dominican Republic is essentially the story of the American Embassy in Santo Domingo, the people in it and its "special guests" from Washington. It is the tale of an embassy that was at first caught unawares by events and then seemed panicked by them, and of otherwise competent diplomats who allowed themselves to lose contact with the real facts of the situation and then made it a policy to ignore them. No definite report can be provided on Washington's role, but it is plain that during the initial period no effective brake on the wild procession of events was applied by the State Department, which seems to have let itself be stampeded by reports from the field.

In this atmosphere of unreality and intrigue there inevitably arose episodes that served almost as comic relief in the impossibly tense and chaotic situation. There was the picture of American Ambassador W. Tapley Bennett Jr. sitting under his desk throughout a strafing by friendly planes and the scene in which a White House emissary climbed through a window for a secret meeting with the rebel chiefs.

And, as the constant counterpart to the political and diplomatic maneuverings, there were the sounds and the smells of the civil war. From the moment that I landed in Santo Domingo on Thursday, April 29—having been ferried by a marine helicopter from the *U.S.S. Boxer* along with other reporters—I lived for five weeks with the barking of machine guns, the thud of mortars and the sudden, dry crackling of snipers' rifles. There was the sweet, sickening smell of death in the overcrowded hospitals and the pungent odor of decay in a city which for weeks had no water and no garbage collection; and there was the quiet heroism of American Peace Corps nurses working under fire in the hospitals, the taut discipline of marines holding fire until the last possible moment.

But for the sake of coherency, this complex story of the U.S. involvement in the Dominican Republic must be told chronologically. It begins with the revolt in Santo Domingo on Saturday, April 24, by a group of civilians and young military officers, who set out to overthrow the provisional government of Donald Reid Cabral and to bring back deposed president Juan Bosch.

But it is really necessary to go back even further, for the recent history of the Dominican Republic is a confused mesh of tawdry events. The country was for 31 years the personal fief of Rafael Leonidas Trujillo Molinas, an

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This article is taken from the book "30 Days in May: A Dominican Diary," to be published in October by Doubleday Press.